

Use of the Internet for Seeking Health Care Information among Young Adults

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Little is known about what types of health information young adults seek online. A survey was conducted at a diverse community college to assess what health topics students seek online, and analyzed on the basis of smoking status. The most popular topic was found to be health/nutrition. Tobacco/smoking information was the least sought after topic even though 22% of the study group identified themselves as smokers.

INTRODUCTION

Young adults search for health-related information online more than any other age group¹, yet little is known about what specific health topics they seek online. Young adults also smoke more than any other age group². Determining what online health topics this group is searching for can help aid in designing online health interventions that may better reach this population.

METHOD

A one-page anonymous survey was administered to students at a large, diverse urban community college in Boston. The survey ascertained demographic factors (age, gender, race), where students accessed the Internet, activities students performed online, specific health topics for which they had searched, and smoking status. Univariate analyses were performed using SPSS.

RESULTS

Of the 127 surveys administered, 125 were completed with sufficient information to include in the analysis. An equal proportion of men and women completed the survey. The mean age of respondents was 22.9 years. The racial composition of the survey group was 41% African American, 30% Caucasian/White (non-Hispanic), 14% Latin-American/Hispanic, 8% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 8% "other." About 20% of the men and 24% of the women identified themselves as smokers. The most popular use of the Internet was for research for school or work (81%), followed closely by email or chat groups (80%). Health information was sought by 43% of the subjects, with no differences observed between men and women. Among those seeking health information, diet/nutrition (52%) and fitness/exercise (43%) were the two most popular topics, whereas tobacco/smoking was the least popular. The one individual who reported searching for this information was a non-smoking male.

DISCUSSION

While a little under half of the students in our survey went online to search for health information, almost none were interested in tobacco information even though numerous web sites exist which promote smoking cessation. Yet over \$1 billion in online tobacco sales took place last year³, suggesting that tobacco merchants are doing a better job of attracting online attention than those providing smoking-related health information. Online smoking interventions are promising but have had difficulty engaging their audiences⁴. A better understanding of factors involved in influencing the online preferences of different groups, including young adults, could lead to more effective and engaging online health interventions. A possible intervention suggested by the results of this study would be to provide smoking cessation information on a site that is primarily about other topics of interest to the targeted age group, such as diet/nutrition, as this might draw more visitors than a site devoted solely to smoking.

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